

8490 DAYS

OF

MEMORY

IK-JOONG KANG

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July 12–September 27, 1996

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

The Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris
is funded by Philip Morris Companies Inc.

This brochure accompanies Ik-Joong Kang's
site-specific installation **8490 Days of Memory**,
organized by Eugenie Tsai, branch director,
Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion.
The essay was also written by Eugenie Tsai.

The artist wishes to thank Mr. Chan-Kyu Woo and
Mr. Joo-Heon Yi for all their support, and
expresses his deepest gratitude to his wife, Margarete.

Special thanks are extended to ART SPACE SEOUL
and the U.G. Foundation.

Cover: Ik-Joong Kang, **Untitled**, 1996

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945 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10021



*But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists,
after the people are dead, after the things are broken and
scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more
enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faith-
ful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering,
waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear
unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of
their essence, the vast structure of recollection.*

— Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*

Ik-Joong Kang's *8490 Days of Memory* is an installation composed of 8490 squares of chocolate hung on foil-covered walls, and the same number of polished clear plastic cubes amassed on the floor below. Each 3-inch square bears an insignia from the US Army cast in relief; each 3-inch cube contains a memento from the artist's childhood. Stacked cubes form a pedestal which supports a 9-foot-statue of Korean war hero General Douglas MacArthur entirely coated in chocolate. For Kang, the sweet scent and taste of creamy chocolate play the role of the tea-soaked madeleine in Proust's novel *Remembrance*



of *Things Past*, bearing in their essence “the vast structure of recollection.” In *8490 Days of Memory*, the combination of materials and imagery coalesces into an elegiac evocation of Kang’s twenty-four years in Korea—exactly 8490 days—prior to immigrating to the US in 1984. This evocation of Kang’s past includes the complex interplay between Korean and American cultures, which continues into the present.

Born in 1960, Kang grew up in Seoul and attended grammar school near a US army base in the It’aewon district of the city. He and fellow students would line up at the gate of the army base and shout “give me chocolate” at the GIs, who would respond by throwing candy bars as they drove past in jeeps. Given the postwar poverty of the time, chocolate was an extraordinary treat. When he was successful in retrieving a candy bar, Kang would slowly remove the foil wrapper before inhaling the scent of chocolate—“smelling America”—to prolong the moment. This sweet and potent fragrance prompted him to fantasize about America. After this ritual, he slowly consumed the precious substance, letting each bite dissolve in his mouth.

Such was Kang’s introduction to American culture and the genesis of his perception of chocolate and GIs as icons of America, icons that became deeply imbedded in his memory. The themes of remembrance and the past are underscored by the 8490 clear plastic cubes, each containing a small object from the artist’s childhood—marbles, miniature masks and animals, windup toys, dice, shells—frozen, preserved, stopped in time. Unlike recollections released by smell and taste, these objects provide concrete evidence of Kang’s youth in Korea during the sixties and seventies.

Whereas the chocolate squares and the objects encased in plastic allude to Kang’s personal life, the figure of General Douglas MacArthur, with its chocolate patina, suggests a collective memory and global dimension to *8490 Days of Memory*. MacArthur, who commanded UN military forces during the Korean War, was responsible for driving North Korean forces back over the 38th parallel. Although eventually dismissed by President Truman, in the eyes of South Koreans





South Korea's Syngman Rhee thanks U.S. president Harry Truman for speeding American troops to his country after it was invaded by North Korea.

he was a hero, representing freedom, bravery, and the American dream. A statue of MacArthur stands in Freedom Park in the town of Incheon, some twenty miles west of Seoul, where it is visited by many Korean tourists. This statue serves as the model for the one in *8490 Days of Memory*.

With MacArthur came the US military presence in Korea that has continued until the recent end of the cold war, when many US military bases began to close. While Korean sentiment was largely pro-American in the two decades following the war, the presence of the US military initiated the erosion of traditional Korean institutions and values. The breakup of a Korean family by a US soldier is poignantly chronicled in a song entitled "Paper Kite," written and sung by Min-Kee Kim, a famous underground pop singer of the seventies:

*Through the dark of the night
mother left leaving only a note
I carried the note to our neighbor
He could only sigh.
I try to understand
when he explains that she followed
Mr. "Hello."*

Mr. "Hello," the homewrecker, is clearly an American GI based in the It'ae Won district.

Since the 1950s, the It'ae Won district has been unique within Seoul, regarded by natives as a foreign city catering to Western needs, with fried chicken chains, nightclubs, and English signage. American tourists visiting Korea view this district as a market for Korean goods, particularly "antiques" (actually replicas). Kang compares It'ae Won to a fortune cookie: Americans think it's Chinese, the Chinese think it's American—a cultural no-man's land or, in a more positive light, a bridge connecting two cultures.

Kang is well aware of the role food has played in proselytizing religion and culture. He points out that American GIs arrived in Korea with chocolate in one hand and guns in the other, much like missionaries who had arrived centuries earlier with rice and bibles. Chocolate is also the product of cross-cultural collaboration. As it originated with the Aztecs in Mexico in the twelfth century, chocolate was a bitter beverage

made from ground cacao beans seasoned with peppers and spices. When the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century, they added sugar to this concoction. The following century, the Dutch introduced chocolate to Italy, Germany, and France. In the eighteenth century, the English added milk. Because it is energy efficient, with a high calorie content packed into a small size, chocolate was issued to soldiers during World War II. Given this background, chocolate becomes an appropriate metaphor for cultural hybridity.

Although *8490 Days of Memory* represents new formal and thematic directions in Kang's work, the creation of an installation with thousands of 3 x 3-inch modules is consistent with the artist's practice since moving to New York in 1984. Upon his arrival, Kang enrolled at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn to pursue an MFA. At the time, he worked long hours at a Korean greengrocers in Manhattan and at a flea market in Far Rockaway, Queens. His schedule left virtually no time to work in the studio. He commuted to his jobs by subway and found that 3-inch-square canvases fit easily into his pocket and could be pulled out and worked on while in transit. These canvases functioned like pages in a diary on which Kang recorded his immediate responses to life in a foreign city. Sometimes he drew with ballpoint pen, sometimes he affixed a found object from the flea market to the canvas. Since his first exhibition in 1986 at the now defunct Two Two Raw Gallery, where he created a thousand paintings over the course of a month and hung them randomly on the walls, Kang has always shown huge numbers of paintings in a single show. The accretion of moments is important in his work. In 1991, he began a series of woodcuts and several series of drawings, but he continues to favor the 3-inch square and the practice of showing numerous



One Month Living Performance,
Two Two Raw Gallery, New York, 1986



Top:
*Throw Everything Together
 and Add*, Capp Street Project,
 San Francisco, 1994;
 right:
*Throw Everything Together
 and Add*, 1994 (detail)





Buddha Eating Chocolate, Leeds Metropolitan University, England, 1996 (detail)

works at once. At his recent installation in Seoul, his largest solo exhibition to date, he showed 50,000 works—paintings, woodcuts, drawings, chocolate squares, and plastic cubes.

Kang first used chocolate in *Buddha Eating Chocolate*, an installation at Leeds Metropolitan University earlier this year. For that installation he had 2,000 3 x 3-inch squares cast in chocolate. He invited community residents to inscribe their names onto the squares before hanging them on the wall. These squares were accompanied by 1,354 paintings of Buddha, some wired for sound, arranged in a grid. The artist's voice could be heard on tape, reciting the names written in chocolate.

Like *8490 Days of Memory*, *Buddha Eating Chocolate* draws on childhood memories, this time of school field trips to



Buddha Eating Chocolate with participants from the local community, Leeds Metropolitan University, England, 1996

Buddhist temples. At the temples, visitors would write their names and the names of family members on strips of paper, and attach the strips to lotuslike spheres on the ceiling to wait for Buddha's blessing. *Buddha Eating Chocolate* suggests Buddha's attempt to learn new names—English ones at that—and to give his blessing in a new cultural context.

Although the format is consistent with Kang's earlier work, the elegiac tone of *3490 Days of Memory* departs from the emphasis on the here and now that has dominated his art to date. While still about popular culture and the artist's biography, it recalls a period in Kang's life when America existed as fantasy and desire. Whereas his other pieces represent a collection of thousands of memories, this work uses thousands of pieces to evoke a single memory. Perhaps Kang's reflections on the past were provoked in part by what has become an over-familiarity with New York; fantasy has given way to reality. Language, everyday details—doorknobs, knives, furniture—are no longer strange and wonderful. Kang is no longer a tourist.

Armed with his memories, Kang returned to Seoul several months ago, after an absence of twelve years. Soldiers have disappeared from the streets of It'ae Won and the small wood and stone buildings of his grammar school have been replaced by a red concrete monstrosity. Chocolate candy from all over the world can be found in great abundance, beautifully packaged and displayed in upscale department stores.

Installation view of *Chanting Buddhas* and 16,000 woodcuts, Art Space Seoul, Korea, 1996



BIOGRAPHY

Ik-Joong Kang

Born in Cheong Ju, Korea, 1960

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

1985

Long Island University, Brooklyn campus, "1000 Paintings"

1986

Two Two Raw Gallery New York, "One Month Living Performance"

1987

Thesis Show, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, "3000 Paintings"

1988

Broadway Windows Gallery, New York, "6000 Paintings"

1990

Main Gallery, Montclair State College, New Jersey,
"Ssound Paintingss"

1991

Amelie Wallace Gallery, State University of New York at
Old Westbury, "More Is More" (collaboration with Bing Lee)

1992

Asian American Art Centre, New York, "Buddha"

The Queens Museum of Art, Queens, New York, "Ik-Joong
Kang, 3 x 3"

1994

Capp St. Project, San Francisco, "Throw Everything
Together & Add (20,000 Works)"

Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion,
Stamford, Connecticut, "Multiple/Dialogue"
(with Nam June Paik)

1996

Art Space Seoul, Korea, Hak Ko Jae Gallery, Cho Sun Ilbo
Museum, "More Is Better (50,000 Works)"

Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara, California,
"365 Days of English"

Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, England,
"Buddha Eating Chocolate"



365 Days of English,
Contemporary Arts Forum,
Santa Barbara, California, 1996

Selected Group Exhibitions

1981

National Art Museum, Seoul, Korea, "Independent"

1982

Total Gallery, Seoul, Korea, "FU Exhibition"

1985

Lasser Gallery, New York, "Summer Group Show"

1986

Now Gallery, New York, "Micro Max"

1987

Bronx River Gallery, Bronx, "Togetherness Always"

Minor Injury, New York, "Personal History"

1989

Asian American Art Centre/City Gallery, New York,
"Uptown, Downtown"

1990

Bedford Stuyvestant Cultural Center, Brooklyn,
"Artist Against Racism" (traveled)

Hong Kong Art Center, Hong Kong, "China" (traveled)

Hunterdon Art Center, Hunterdon, New Jersey, "Food"

Iida Museum, Japan, "International Art Show"

1991

University of Illinois at Chicago, Gallery 400, "Louder"
(traveled)

1993

CUNY Graduate Center, New York, "New Expressions in
Asian American Art"

The Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S. 1 Museum, Long
Island City, "Slow Art"

A Space Gallery, Toronto, "Dismantling Invisibility" (traveled)

1994

Capp St. Project, San Francisco, "Old Glory, New Story"
(traveled)

Centro Wilfredo Lam, Havana, "Habana International
Biennial"

Selected Public Performances

1986

Legien/Leurschordamm, Berlin, "For the Cold Wall"
Openplatz, Kassel, Germany, "Flying Paintings"

1987

Bronx River Gallery, Bronx, "Everybody Thinks Oral Sex"

1990

Main Gallery, Montclair State College, New Jersey/Epoch
Gallery, Brooklyn, "Untitled" (collaboration with
Sang-Won Park)



Awards/Commissions

1990

New York Foundation Art Fellowship in Painting

1991

Commission, Metropolitan Transit Authority, New York

1992

Commission, Department of Cultural Affairs, New York

1994

Commission, San Francisco International Airport

New York Foundation Art Fellowship in Painting



Publications

1991

“Throw Everything Together and Add,” published by
Ik-Joong Kang with his 1990 income tax return

Installation view of 7,000 paintings, Art Space Seoul, Korea, 1996

Installation by Ik-Joong Kang (b. 1960)

8490 Days of Memory, 1996

Foil, chocolate, plastic cubes, sculpture, and camera
dimensions variable

Collection of the artist

**Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris
Park Avenue at 42nd Street
New York, New York 10017**

Gallery Hours

Monday-Friday, 11:00 am-6:00 pm

Thursday, 11:00 am-7:30 pm

Sculpture Court Hours

Monday-Saturday, 7:30 am-9:30 pm

Sunday, 11:00 am-7:00 pm

Gallery Talks

Monday and Friday at 1:00 pm

Free admission

Tours by appointment

For more information, call (212) 878-2453

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Bob de Bris: 8; George Hirose: 1; Korean Cultural Services: 3;

Mark Purcell: 6

Design: Bethany Johns Design

Printing: Herlin Press

유제니 사이 기획 1996

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WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART AT PHILIP MORRIS